

The multi-layered nature of land: telecoupling and the need for looking across scales

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Land in the African continent is object of struggles stretching across scales and domains. Its pivotal role among spheres and contexts has been recurrently shown in scholarship, although research endeavours have tended to simplify its nature for analytical reasons. As boundaries between the rural and urban spheres, local and global scales, or market and subsistence oriented economies blur, our capacity to understand dynamics around land that are based on ontological dualities is challenged.

The telecoupling framework has emerged as a promising heuristic to look beyond these binaries and engage the inherent complexity surrounding these issues. This approach, first devised in the land science community to explore the interconnected nature of land-use change, holds significant potential for other disciplines investigating claims over and experiences around land. North-east Madagascar provides a powerful illustration of the potentials and limitations of resorting to such an approach for disentangling land-related questions spanning over multiple loci. This region is at the centre of cross-scalar demands for goods and services provided by nature, chiefly due to its status as a global biodiversity hotspot and as a crucial location in the country for the production of cash crops grown for the international market. On the one hand, the biological diversity occurring in the region, together with its perceived endangered situation, has led in last decades to the creation of several externally-funded protected areas, meaning the actual closure of the forest frontier and additional strain on the livelihoods of communities living in the area. On the other hand, the price spike in the global market experienced recently by vanilla and clove, major income sources for these populations, is driving rapid and profound changes in the landscapes, which might drive into unexpected pathways. This paper aims to contribute to overcoming categorical dichotomies by providing a critical geographical perspective on the understanding that has traditionally characterised our subjects of research.